“I’m Still a Bride”

Becca Bolstein

At the age of 10, I was sent home with a sheet of construction paper in my Lisa Frank holographic purple unicorn folder. On top of the sheet in scrawled, loopy cursive was the assignment: draw a picture of where you see yourself in 10 years (ex: fireman, lawyer, doctor, etc).

When I returned to school the next day, my teacher—a woman recently divorced (after her prolonged secret fling with our art teacher had been exposed)—appraised my homework with a dark furrowed brow and lips pursed so tightly they blanched at the seam between them.

“What’s this?” Her fingernail rapped like a gavel against the desk.

I’d glued a cutout from a magazine onto my paper, the glue oozing out from the sides like a kind of messy ethereal glow. In the center of said divine glue glow was a woman in an equally as bright gown, her face photoshopped to just the right shade of pinkish cream to reflect her bursting joy.

She was a bride.

“In ten years,” I replied, voice small in the face of authority. “I’ll be a bride.”

“You see yourself married in ten years?” she repeated, voice edging on amused in a laughing-at-you-not-with-you way.

“No,” I said, blinking slowly behind thick-framed bifocal glasses, as if the movement of black lash-blur in front of my eyes might make my brain conjure words faster in order to give a sufficient reply. “I’ll be a bride.”
At the age of fifteen, the television phenomenon called “Say Yes to the Dress” began airing on TLC. Essentially, the show features three or four women each episode, all of which are seeking the “perfect wedding dress.” Some have limited budgets (by limited, though, they are just staying in the lower thousands of dollars) and some have fathers with open wallets or famous fiscally-blessed fiancés. Most bring large parties of friends and family, and there tends to be one or two members of said bridal party who verbally harass the bride due to a) her body, b) her taste, c) some unknown, though easily readable underlying jealousy or tension.

It became a family affair in my house to sit and watch this “reality” show in our respective places in the living room (my dad in his olive green suede recliner chair—which he falsely but endearingly called ‘the brown chair,’ my mother—whom I only call ‘mother’ in writing or behind her back in a sarcastic, snide, troll-ish sort of voice—in her floral patterned chair, and my brother and I on the brown leather couch, the cushions of which had melted under our bottoms over the years).

My dad tried to abstain from making comments about the women’s bodies, though he couldn’t help the occasional “she looks like an overweight, retired salsa dancer,” while my mother held nothing back. It’s almost instinctual sometimes when people put themselves on display in such a way that you can really only react in one of two ways: abject silence or outright judgment.

Even at the age of 10, I knew what a bride was somehow supposed to look like. I knew the woman glued crookedly onto my construction paper assignment was for some reason what every bride was supposed to look like; tall, thin, pale, glowing.

“Say Yes to the Dress” confronted issues that I wasn’t aware brides faced—family disapproval, controlling friends, body image problems. Some brides could not even fit into the
sample-sized gowns to even find their own dress (which then spurred the creation of "Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss," where even plus-sized brides can find over-priced gowns and thus their own happiness!).

When I watched SYttD with my family, it was impossible to not feel the pressure of being the only daughter. The pressure of my mother asking plaintively, "Would that kind of dress look good on you, do you think?" or my father commenting, "How much money do you plan on begging from my wallet for something like this, anyhow, Boo?"

I was a bride again.

As a young female, I was made a bride.

At that time, I didn't realize the consequences of such an assumption. I didn't realize deep in my heart that being a bride meant being married. It meant being part of a culture of roles and expectations, being a woman with a man, being a woman who must stand on a literal pedestal-of-sorts in the middle of a room of people waiting for the slightest flaw to criticize, waiting for a preconceived "bridal" moment when they'll somehow "know" that the dress is the one.

Saying "yes" to the dress is aligned to saying "yes" to a man. Both are made objects in a sense, but the dress is made more important in a way that perhaps is meant to be empowering. By making the day about the bride, it's as if American society is saying, "well, as long as you can find someone to marry you (and by that, we mean you're a woman, and he's a man), then the day can be yours." Yours to put yourself on display. Yours to suffer in preparation for. Yours to be criticized for if anything goes wrong.

"On her wedding day, everyone will be looking at the bride" the Men's Wearhouse tuxedo commercial declares. The commercial essentially states that even though the wedding is
about the bride—all eyes will be on the bride—the bride’s eyes will be on you, the man, the man in the tuxedo, the tuxedo, so it’s pretty hard to fuck this up if you just shop here. You have one job, man.

We all laugh at those shows about “Bridezillas,” the women who become so obsessed with having the “perfect wedding” that they basically ostracize everyone else involved in the wedding planning process and humiliate themselves on national television.

But why do we criticize women for caring too much about something for which they’re naturally expected to make perfect just by being women? Women are meant to be natural brides. They’re meant to naturally fit into some kind of perfect pattern, traced and cut from bridal magazines. They have to fit in the sample-sized gowns, they have to be able to afford the silk gown because the “other” fabrics look like down comforters, they have to have a groom whose sole responsibility for the wedding is to show up and say the vows, and they have to be ready for all eyes on them. Everyone waits for the bride to trip down the aisle, for there to not be enough cocktail weenies at cocktail hour, for mentally-unstable Uncle Hector to have been accidentally seated next to grudge-holding Aunt Marcie, thus creating a violent raucous during the Maid of Honor toast.

If you’re a real woman, you’ll be a real bride.

If you’re a real bride, you must be a real woman.

It’s all natural.

When I turned 17, my family’s obsession with “Say Yes to the Dress” had not yet weaned. We still waited for “Friday is Bride Day,” when wedding shows were marathoned from the afternoon until about 10 PM. It became more about my father and I, though.
My father had an active interest in my future as a bride, since I was his only daughter, and it was as if we were back in the old country in Belarus, and he had to calculate my dowry of torahs and Kiddush cups for whichever one of my fortunate (probably closely related) suitors had the right amount of cows or silver to purchase—marry me.

At the age of 17, then, the “Wedding Dress Fund” (hereby abbreviated as WDF) was born. It began with a small glass jar, airtight and previously utilized for storing Utz pretzel sticks.

My father and I calculated that, were I to be married by age 24 (the age my mother was), and I needed $5000 (the average budget of brides on SYttD), we could raise that amount by adding $15 each Friday (Bride Day) into the jar.

And so it began.

I was a bride in training.

At the age of 19, I caught the bouquet at my cousin Amy’s wedding.

Well, by “caught the bouquet” I mean the bouquet ribbon snagged on one arm of the chandelier, and I waited under it until a few roses dripped out and cascaded into my arms.

We counted it, since the clean-up crew ended up being the ones to remove the rest of the bouquet. Perhaps somewhere, a nice young janitor woman is celebrating her anniversary because of that chandelier.

As per bouquet tradition, my cousin Amy gave me all her wedding planning magazines, since superstition stated I was next to be married. The magazines were stowed in a large orange and pink striped box, and I spent hours each day flipping through and un-folding all her dog-earned pages and replacing them with my own carefully selected folds.
I lost myself in color-coded flower arrangements and DIY decorations and centerpieces. I lost myself in something I assumed I would one day utilize. I lost myself in the future I’d assumed for myself. I lost myself.

There’s something disturbing about weddings.

There’s something somewhat voyeuristic about watching two people binding themselves together for all eternity in the sight of God.

There’s something curious about the soft hum of artificial yellow lighting fixtures that mixes with occasional snotty sniffle and sharp intake of breath that doesn’t belong to either bride or groom.

There’s something intriguing about the whole practice. The way we gather to “witness,” the way we cry for others’ eternal joy, the way we use love as an excuse to host the most expensive party we’ll ever need to have.

Is it love we’re celebrating? Or is it just another coming of age? Instead of just a boy becoming a man and a girl becoming a woman separately, maybe we’re all really celebrating the way a man and woman have mutually agreed to enter into their traditional future roles together. They’ve decided to define their roles together. A bride and groom. A woman and a man. A wife and husband. A future mother and future father.

My mother used to make jokes. “You need a groom to get married.”

In my head, a wedding was still just a party for the bride, a celebration of her beauty and existence in this world as a woman. It was a coming of age, a public first menstruation in front of all her friends and family, who would clap and shed beautiful shimmering tears for her.
“You need a boyfriend in order to later have a groom,” she’d add.

“I’ve had boyfriends,” I’d reply, wrinkling my nose in distaste at the memories.

“One month does not a relationship make,” she’d say, her seemingly Yoda-like wisdom apparently meant to wake up my natural in-born female instinct to catch a male and claim him as my own.

“I got bored,” I’d say, which was true. My mother and I may have argued a lot about most things, but I tended to be as honest as a daughter could (and possibly shouldn’t be). “Men bore me.”

“Men bore everyone, dear,” she’d say, flipping the channel to Fox News, not really watching it but listening to the ignorance (though she didn’t believe so) as a kind of familiar, soothing white noise. “But you need a groom to be married.”

“And I need to be married to have a wedding?”

“Bride plus groom equals wedding. Wedding equals marriage.”

My chest tended to give a slight painful twinge at these words, as if my own reply had gotten caught on the way up from my gut (because I feel as if most of my thoughts originate in my gut as opposed to my brain), and that thought had struggled to slither its way up the slippery tube of my esophagus, resorted to climbing the rungs of my ribs, got impaled on the end of one, wriggled in agony for a while, and then gave up.

And so my chest ached, and I didn’t reply. I never replied.

There’s something charming about a room of mirrors. There’s something alarming about it too. You could even say there’s something fetishistic about it.

Mirrors don’t always reflect your image.
Mirrors reflect whatever’s in front of them. Mirrors exist in a state of constant reflection whether you’re peering into them or not.

Does that alarm you? Sometimes.

If you aren’t gazing down impatiently at the metal front of your toaster as it cradles your imitation white/wheat bread in its electrical heated bosom, does its reflective surface become flat and opaque?

When you pass by a reflective surface, can you resist the urge to fix your hair or flatten down the front of your button-down shirt before your mother-in-law discovers your minor imperfections?

We seem to live for mirrors. Mirrors as confirmation that we’re present somewhere. Mirrors as what we assume are perfect reflections of how we appear to others, though our own eyes and minds are the ones that comprehend our reflections. We don’t ask others to peer into our mirrors and affirm they see what we see.

The first time I tried on prom dresses, I was in a bridal salon whose interior was rimmed with mirrors. I had a consultant whose name began with an L(?), and she tried to squeeze me into dresses seemingly made for prepubescent girls.

It was pretty humiliating, really, to be in a room filled with mirrors, those mirrors shadowed by eyes, those eyes in the heads of strangers who had no reason or impulse to praise or mollify me. Whenever anyone emerged into the main show floor and stepped up clumsily onto the small stage in front of the largest set of mirrors, everyone else in the room paused their existences to notice that one girl. There were soft sounds of approval, even softer snorts of disapproval, and the occasional stage-whispered-so-the-whole-room-could-hear “Oh, you should try that one next; it might work better on you”s.
I suppose it was one of the first times I realized that being a woman in a pretty dress did not automatically qualify me for praise.

I suppose it was one of the first times I felt an awful sense of foreboding in my own gender.

And it was one of the first times I was afraid of becoming a bride. An imperfect bride. An imperfect woman.

Or perhaps all women are imperfect until proven otherwise by becoming brides.

Is there a way to prove otherwise without becoming a bride?

How do you become a bride if you are naturally imperfect?

The first time I came home and told my mother I wanted to marry Scarlett Johansson, she laughed. I suppose my whole family took it as an “I’d go gay for…” comment. I once met a man whose opening statement to me in a bar was “I’d go gay for Bublé.” I didn’t find it quite as charming as he might’ve assumed, but I let him buy me a cider anyhow.

The second time I said I wanted to marry Scarlett, it became a running joke in the family. The consecutive times following, I became agitated that no one believed me.

“Mom,” I said one day, seated on the passenger side in my mother’s red Lexus SUV. My fingers coiled apprehensively around my cell phone, as if I might need to emergency tweet “SOS” or call the police if something didn’t work out in our conversation.

“Yes, Boobird?”

“My counselor thinks I should be honest with you,” I told her, pressing the up and down volume buttons on my phone in sequence. The pattern matched the pressure welling and swelling and shrinking and shriveling up in my gut. Up. Tell her. Down. Roll the window down and vomit
onto the freeway instead. Up. Tell her, Goddamnit. Down. No, really, I think I might vomit blood instead. I can feel the blood. I feel it behind my eyes and in my palms and beneath my tailbone.

"Uh huh," my mother replied.

"So...do you know I’m bisexual?" I said, the words wheezing from my lungs like the last words of a dying man in the arms of his war comrades.

Her hand froze over the volume dial on the radio console, and in that moment we were both monitoring our impulses to speak with volume controls. It felt right.

"No."

"Well, I am, and I felt like you should know." A pause. And then: "Thoughts?" as if I were leaving her a blank space on a questionnaire.

"As long as you’re happy," she said.

"But are you okay with it?"

_Am I still a woman capable of being perfect?_

"Do...women make you happy?" She said the word "women" like we were guests on Oprah, discussing drug issues present in suburban America.

"Yeah."

"Have you...been with women?"

Roll the window down, Becca. Here comes the blood. It’s in your forearms now. It’s in your throat. It’s under your tongue.

"Do you mean like...?"

Becca (I frequently talk about myself in third person when I don’t want to be associated with my own thoughts and actions), you’ve told her about sex before. You’ve asked to use the
credit card to purchase Plan B. You’ve told her about guys whose names you didn’t know until
you found them on Facebook the next day.

But those men could be grooms.

You need a groom to get married.

You need to be a bride to be a woman.

To be a bride, you need a man.

To become a perfect woman you need to…

What about the jar? What about the dress?

“Sex?” I clarified, beads of sweat forming on the back of my neck and dripping down
between my shoulder blades. “Or love?”

For some reason I think maybe the second suggestion surprised her more than the first.

You can have sex and forget about it. You can have sex regardless of gender and no one will
have to know. But love…

Love is for the future.

I thought I had my future. I thought I was a bride.

We all thought I was a bride.

Re-evaluating my role in society is kind of exhausting.

Re-evaluating my predicted future is also exhausting.

Realizing that everything I had planned out for my future in my head had been prescribed
to me from birth because of my genitals and female sex hormones…well, that’s probably the
kicker.
"Are you the boy or the girl?" one friend asks me upon discovering my interest in women.

We’re sitting on my couch in my living room, sipping the expensive red wine my mother can no longer drink because of her migraines. Even though all the other seats are vacant, I can’t seem to sit anywhere but on my leather couch, in my softened spot, where my butt has always belonged.

“I’m the Becca?”

“No, but like, in the relationship are you the boy or the girl?” She waves her plastic goblet around in a dramatic gesture, as if trying to explain the importance of the question.

“No, really, I’m still Becca. We’re both girls.” I find myself gesturing as well, sorting the air in front of me, as if saying ‘I’m here’ and ‘she’s here’ and ‘we’re both still here and nothing has changed.’

“But one of you is probably more masculine right?”

“I mean, I guess that’s me?” I figured I was generally a more dominant person in most aspects of life, so that must make me the more masculine one in a relationship. Plus, I’d started wearing pants a lot more. Those must translate to metaphorical pants.

It’s bizarre how even the most non-traditional aspects of myself became organized into traditional statements when I need to explain myself to people. Yes, I say, I like women, but it’s okay because I become the man.

But that isn’t true.

I’m still a bride. She’s just...she’s also a bride.

What’s equally alarming about the first couple months of my life after coming out to my mother and some of my friends is that I tried very hard to traditionalize my non-traditional self. I
cut off all my hair, I stopped wearing dresses, and I began idealizing the thought of myself in a suit.

One night at a football play-off party, my mother’s friends discuss transgendered youth, as one of their daughters works with a woman transitioning into a man. One woman at the party says, “It must be really hard…”

I chime in, “The hormones are supposedly pretty uncomfortable. Like going through a second puberty. The reverse puberty.”

The woman gives me the side-eyes and shakes her head. “I mean for the parents, dear,” she says. “To discover your child isn’t who you think she is.”

I cast a glance over at my own mother cradling her glass of white wine and staring down into its depths as if they might cleanse away her knowledge of me.

“The child isn’t different. Why should genitals and gender affect who your child is?” I say, and I can feel my mother’s heated embarrassment radiating against my arm.

“But one day their daughter will be their son, and that’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

My mother lifts her head, and I can see in her eyes that she’s had more than enough to drink to be able to say something like, “My daughter is transitioning into a male,” as she points to my short hair and button-down shirt.

I feel briefly as if I’ve been betrayed.

But then I realize that perhaps I have been transitioning somehow, trying to fit myself into where I assumed I needed to be in order to remain in a traditional place.

If I were going to be queer, I supposed, I needed to choose a role. When I was completely straight, I was the bride. But, then, don’t most women want to be the bride? Should I relinquish my role as bride in order to make some future woman happy?
Could I be the groom, the one whose sole responsibility is to wear a tuxedo and show up at the altar? Then again, gay marriage being illegal most places, should I even be thinking about marriage at all?

There are episodes of “Say Yes to the Dress” which feature lesbian couples. These are the episodes during which most of my family vacates the living room to find something a little less discomforting to watch. It’s interesting, for me, since I assumed society had less contempt for lesbians than homosexual men, since most of the disquiet of queerness sparks from a disquiet with men’s own questionable place in the current patriarchy.

I suppose what made my family uncomfortable during these episodes was the way in which the women interacted. Often, as I had felt upon coming out, it’s expected than one woman will assume the role of the patriarchal figure. It feels safer that way, when you see two women on the street holding hands and one of them has short hair, a blazer, and loose jeans. There’s no tension in the fact that they’re probably together. Otherwise, they could just be friends, close friends who hold hands. I’ve held hands with plenty of my straight female friends, and no one would question our relationship.

If two straight men held hands, that would be different.

But if one woman assumes the role of the man, then it makes sense. There must be a groom and a bride. There must be someone in a tux and someone in a dress.

But often on the show, both women would seek dresses.

Often my family could not handle the disorientation of watching two brides in one wedding. There must be one bride, one special woman who stands on her pedestal and accepts
the love and praise of the less-bold, less-recognized male figure. But what if two women walk down the aisle, share the spotlight, glow in their bridal bliss together?

It isn’t hard to sense that we’ve come to expect traditional roles to somehow remain in non-traditional structures of society. Even with homosexual men, we analyze the way they dress, the way they speak, waiting for one of them to expose himself as the “femme” one in the relationship. With lesbians, we wait for one to be butch and one to be femme. We can ignore the matching genital structure if it means we retain some semblance of opposition in appearance and countenance.

Someone has to dominate and someone has to be dominated. We expect patriarchy in places where patriarchy is despised.

We expect the future to be easily sorted out: one person stands at the altar and one person walks to them. One person shows up in a tux and the other frets about in a wedding dress, acting like a complete nervous lunatic until her maid of honor offers her a Xanax and a mimosa.

If there are two men in tuxes, one of them must be white. One of them must wait at the altar. One of them must speak in a more high-pitched, traditionally feminine octave. One of them must cry while the other remains stoic, laughing as he retrieves his pocket square for the other to cry into.

If there are two women in one wedding, one must wear a tux and stand up front. One must have a lower voice, a thicker bone structure, a more dominant presence. One of them must somehow fit the role of the man. There cannot be two brides. We cannot all be brides. I am a bride. I’m still a bride. In a tuxedo or not. I’m a bride.